

THERFIELD CHAPEL

Sunday 24 October 2004 6:30pm

3 JOHN

*The elder,
To my dear friend Gaius, whom I love in the truth.*

[2] Dear friend, I pray that you may enjoy good health and that all may go well with you, even as your soul is getting along well. [3] It gave me great joy to have some brothers come and tell about your faithfulness to the truth and how you continue to walk in the truth. [4] I have no greater joy than to hear that my children are walking in the truth.

[5] Dear friend, you are faithful in what you are doing for the brothers, even though they are strangers to you. [6] They have told the church about your love. You will do well to send them on their way in a manner worthy of God. [7] It was for the sake of the Name that they went out, receiving no help from the pagans. [8] We ought therefore to show hospitality to such men so that we may work together for the truth.

[9] I wrote to the church, but Diotrephes, who loves to be first, will have nothing to do with us. [10] So if I come, I will call attention to what he is doing, gossiping maliciously about us. Not satisfied with that, he refuses to welcome the brothers. He also stops those who want to do so and puts them out of the church.

[11] Dear friend, do not imitate what is evil but what is good. Anyone who does what is good is from God. Anyone who does what is evil has not seen God. [12] Demetrius is well spoken of by everyone--and even by the truth itself. We also speak well of him, and you know that our testimony is true.

[13] I have much to write you, but I do not want to do so with pen and ink. [14] I hope to see you soon, and we will talk face to face.

Peace to you. The friends here send their greetings. Greet the friends there by name.

A few years ago, the Royal Mail ran a series of adverts on television encouraging us to write more letters. They showed images of joy on the faces of grandparents receiving a letter from their grandchild on the other side of the world. They showed a tear in the eye of a mother receiving the first letter from her daughter away at university. They showed a young woman holding to her face a letter from her boyfriend away serving in the army.

I guess the Royal Mail did this partly to try and persuade people that phone calls, e-mails and text messages don't have quite the same emotional impact as a letter, written in the handwriting of a loved one, on some nice notepaper which the sender would have actually held in their own hand. Actually, Royal Mail were obviously just attempting to increase their profits - but the images they conjured up in our minds were valid.

We live in a fast age of instant communications these days. E-mails fly round the world at near the speed of light. Now that we all have mobile phones, it's possible to speak to almost anyone, anywhere, at any time. Text messaging has added another means of sending brief, semi-English messages to friends almost instantaneously. And very useful they are too ... but not something you can tie with a pink ribbon and keep in a shoebox on top of the wardrobe to read again years later!

At the time of those Royal Mail adverts, I regarded them with some cynicism. Few of us have time, or make the time, these days to sit down, get out the pad of nice cream-coloured Basildon Bond notepaper, find a decent fountain pen, fill it with ink and write a nice letter. The very thought of finding a matching envelope and a postage stamp fills us with horror - and the prospect of walking to the pillar-box in the rain is beyond the realm of reason!

But yet there is something nice about receiving a nice hand-written letter from someone we are fond of. The shakiness of the handwriting tells us something about the health or age of the writer. The use of underlining and exclamation marks conveys more emotion than comes across in a text message or e-mail. The inclusion of a drawing by our darling 5-year-old grandchild on the back of a piece of spare wallpaper is enough to bring tears of happiness to the eye.

But I don't want to over-romanticise the impact of a written letter. The only paper letters I get these days are along the lines of:

Dear Mr Martin,

According to our records we have not yet received payment of your gas bill ...

But let's make no mistake: if e-mail had been around in the time of the Apostles, they would have been among the very first to have used it. I can well imagine that St Paul's computer keyboard would have been glowing red-hot, and the laser printer in the church at Corinth would be getting through a whole toner cartridge every day!

If you don't want to listen to the rest of this talk, you might just let your mind wander and imagine what e-mail addresses the early apostles might have chosen ...

saint.peter@pearly_gates.org
saint.paul@and_finally_bretheren.com
saint.john@fishers_of_men.net !

The important thing about a letter, of course, is not what it's written on, or how it is delivered: it is the content and language.

And in this third letter from John the Apostle, we see a wonderful example of a letter between two Christians. Unlike the other epistles of the NT, this is a personal letter. It is not addressed to the church. It is not written in a way which indicates it was written with the intention of it being read out aloud or circulated. So here, we are privileged to eavesdrop on a piece of personal communication between friends. For that reason, it is unique in the NT.

And what a gracious and pleasant example it is, of a loving letter, unhurriedly written from one Christian to another.

Let's read the opening again:

To my dear friend Gaius, whom I love in the truth.

Dear friend, I pray that you may enjoy good health and that all may go well with you, even as your soul is getting along well.

And the ending of the letter is similarly affectionate -

[13] I have much to write you, but I do not want to do so with pen and ink. [14] I hope to see you soon, and we will talk face to face. Peace to you. The friends here send their greetings. Greet the friends there by name.

Lovely, isn't it? I don't want to make too much of it ... but it does no harm to reflect on how we greet one another, whether it's by letter or telephone or e-mail or face-to-face. How often do we take a few seconds to include an expression of our love and affection for someone, before steaming straight into the main reason for the conversation?

Clearly, the Apostle John had affection for Gaius. The name Gaius was a very common name, so we don't know for sure exactly who he was, or where he was. In verse 4, John says:

[4] I have no greater joy than to hear that my children are walking in the truth.

From that, I think it is safe to assume that John was Gaius' spiritual father - someone whom the Apostle had personally introduced to the Lord. It may also be that the church of which Gaius was a member was one that had been planted by John himself - probably in that part of Asia we now know as Turkey.

John seems to have been urging Gaius to show hospitality to Demetrius who was evidently a travelling Christian preacher. Demetrius was probably also the postman for this letter. So it's a letter of introduction as well.

The Apostle John apparently needed to appeal directly to Gaius for the support of Demetrius, since Gaius' church was dominated by a man named Diotrephes who was very unwelcoming to travelling preachers. In fact, Diotrephes even tried to excommunicate church members who offered these preachers hospitality. We can assume that Gaius was a member of the same church, and that he had some strength of character too - it sounds like he would have needed it to stand up to the domineering Diotrephes!

So at the local church level, we have, it seems a power struggle. On the one hand, Diotrephes seems to have emerged as leader and is keen for the church there to be self-sufficient, self-governing and he didn't welcome the interference from these meddling preachers sent by the Apostle John. He seems to have become the local Bishop - or Chief Elder by some means or other. He resented the visits from these apostolic emissaries. Diotrephes maintained that the local church was now big enough, and established enough, to look after itself and not count itself as under the governance of any external church authority.

On the other hand, we have Gaius: friend and disciple of the Apostle John. And he seems a much more Christian character. He seems much more willing to receive and give hospitality to the travelling preachers. And so it is to Gaius that John writes, as he commends him to receive Demetrius.

John would have known that this would cause problems between Gaius and Diotrephes. And John expresses the hope (verse 10) that he would be able to go and sort Diotrephes out in person if he gets the chance to make a visit.

Power struggles within a Church are not uncommon, unfortunately. The people who play a part in these struggles are often unaware that they are doing it. Anyone who is simply there to put themselves into positions of authority is easily spotted and dealt with. Generally, these power struggles are a bit more subtle, and often have an underlying reason which might sometimes even seem quite reasonable.

Most churches, whether back in the first century, or even today, are planted. In other words, a well established church that gets too big might decide to form another fellowship nearby, so that the size of the congregations are kept manageable. It may be that when new towns and settlements are established, a local church might have the vision to establish a new fellowship there to serve the new population. It may be that the church was established from scratch as a missionary venture, either at home or abroad.

Whatever their origin, these new churches are very much the fledglings of the parent church. At the start, they will have had a lot of help and input from the founding church, who would have supplied their preachers and, to a large extent, run the church affairs. The correctness of their doctrine would have been overseen by the parent church; their church officers would have been appointed or approved by the parent church etc etc.

Then there comes a point where the new church grows and it matures in the faith - to the point where it really can become self-governing. Its members are contributing money enough so that the fellowship and its ministry are self-supporting. How very natural, therefore, that it should feel the need to ease itself away from the apron strings of its parent church and stand on its own two feet.

But also - how natural for the parent church to want to keep an eye on its child and to maintain its influence.

How many of you have reached the maturity of middle-age and yet feel that your own parents still treat you like children?!

This dilemma must be common, even today, where missionary societies plant churches, whether it be in the depths of Bongobongo Land or in the new towns like Cambourne. When should the parent church let go, and when should the fledgling church want to leave the nest.

So, to an extent, Diotrephes may have been thinking along the right lines. The time might have been right for that fellowship to become a little more independent from its founders. But the way he was going about it was decidedly unchristian. William Barclay says this:

We may have a good deal of sympathy with Diotrephes; we may well think that he was taking a stand which sooner or later had to be taken. But for all his strength of character he had one fault--he was lacking in charity. As C. H. Dodd has put it: "There is no real religious experience which does not express itself with charity." That is why, for all his powers of leadership and for all his dominance of character, Diotrephes was not a real Christian, as John saw it. The true Christian leader must always remember that strength and gentleness must go together and that leading and loving must go hand in hand. Diotrephes was like so many leaders in the church. He may well have been right, but he took the wrong way to achieve his end, for no amount of strength of mind can take the place of love of heart.

As Paul puts it in Ephesians 4:15

***Speaking the truth in love**, we will in all things grow up into him who is the Head, that is, Christ.*

Speaking the truth in love.

In the question of the church's independence, there is a middle way. And it's not a compromise. It is the way that Jesus intended from the beginning of the Church when the Holy Spirit came at Pentecost. We like to think of the church worldwide as the body of Christ on earth, through which the Holy Spirit breathes the very life of Christ ... just as blood flows through our bodies, supplying oxygen and food to all the organs of our body. It is the movement of blood round our bodies that keeps us alive. If our livers or brains were to decide that they now had all the blood they needed, and decided to cut themselves off from the flow of blood round the body, they would become diseased and die.

Similarly, a church that cuts itself off from the breath of the Holy Spirit flowing through the whole Body of Christ will eventually succumb to the disease of sin and false teaching - and it will die.

And how does the Spirit flow throughout the Body of Christ? As often as not, it is by people! Christian folk, living Christian lives, using their spiritual gifts and ministering one to another.

And this is the point that the naughty Diotrephes didn't appreciate. No fellowship exists - or should exist - in isolation from the rest of the Body of Christ. The welcoming of the ministry of others is like opening yourselves up to the flow of fresh blood through the body. Each organ in the body benefits from, and contributes to, the health of the whole body.

To your credit, Therfield, you not only welcome visiting preachers, but you actually invite them! And yet you are a self-governing church. You have the maturity and income to maintain yourselves as a growing body. You have your own leadership which does not answer to external organisations, and yet you do not cut yourselves off, you have not isolated yourselves from the fellowship and teaching of others. Praise God for this! It is a very healthy and entirely Christian position to be in.

More than that ... just as each organ of the body benefits from, and contributes to, the health of the whole body, so you too contribute to the health of the whole body of Christ. You support the work of missionaries both at home and overseas, Some of you speak at other fellowships too. So in this wonderful and spiritual way - you have reached this marvellous state of being self-supporting and yet in active fellowship with the rest of God's church - both locally and worldwide.

This is the middle way that Diotrephes could not conceive. If he had his own way, he would have cut off links with the rest of the Apostolic Church. His church would not have benefited from the live-giving breath of the Holy Spirit breathing through it. Not only would his church have eventually succumbed to sin and false teaching as it became starved, but it also would have contributed nothing to the life of the rest of the Body of Christ - the worldwide church. And the church that does not welcome missionaries is a church that is unlikely to send any. Not only does it eventually itself die: it affects the health of the whole body.

I'd like to return to what Paul says in Ephesians 4:11-16

He gave some to be apostles, some to be prophets, some to be evangelists, and some to be pastors and teachers, [12] to prepare God's people for works of service, so that the body of Christ may be built up [13] until we all reach unity in the faith and in the knowledge of the Son of God and become mature, attaining to the whole measure of the fullness of Christ.

[14] Then we will no longer be infants, tossed back and forth by the waves, and blown here and there by every wind of teaching and by the cunning and craftiness of men in their deceitful scheming. [15] Instead, speaking the truth in love, we will in all things grow up into him who is the Head, that is, Christ. [16] From him the whole body, joined and held together by every supporting ligament, grows and builds itself up in love, as each part does its work.

OK Therfield, I realise that one big factor in you welcoming visiting preachers is that you are without your own pastor at the moment. But I know you well enough to know that, when you do get a new pastor, you will not cut yourself off from the wider Christian fellowship. People like me may not be invited 10 times a year, but we will be invited once or twice or at least I hope so!

The last thing you need is a Diotrephes for a Pastor. The last thing you need is a Pastor who promises to deliver all the preaching and teaching you need, or one who encourages you to pull up the drawbridge and turn Therfield into an isolated happy-

clappy holy huddle. This is not the way of Christ. This is not how the Spirit moves through the church.

You need a Gaius as a Pastor. You need someone who realises that he is a part of a larger body, someone who realises that he himself, and the fellowship, need to welcome visiting speakers and need to reach out as speakers and missionaries too. This is how the Spirit breathes through the worldwide church.

I hope you're getting a rather bubbly sense of excitement at this point. I am. It's so easy to sit here, Sunday by Sunday, staring at these four walls and to think that this is all there is. I hope very much that in some small way you can see that you're very much a part of the mainstream of the flow of the Holy Spirit breathing through the whole church. As you welcome visiting speakers, and as you play your part in encouraging others in other churches and mission fields, you are part of the blood supply to the whole body of Christ. You are benefiting from, and contributing to, the health of the whole church. Perhaps you didn't even realise it.

On a personal note: It's perhaps easy for you to think that when you ask me here to come and speak to you, that it's a one-way street. It's perhaps easy for you to think that I just give and you take. I'd like to assure you that that is far from true. I suspect none of you have any idea at all just how much of an encouragement it is for me to come here. It's not just the welcome, the friendliness and the little chats. It is the fellowship, the worship and seeing the Lord working among you. Preaching here encourages me to pray and study my Bible more. It encourages me to know that I'm part of the wider fellowship of God's Church too. It thrills me to know that I, with you, am part of the blood supply which the Holy Spirit uses to breathe life through his church.

Great isn't it? This is exactly how it should be. This is the kind of church that the Apostle John and his friend Gaius knew about. This is the kind of church that the Lord intended right from the start.

May we all continue to be like Gaius. May we all continue to welcome the Demetrius's of this world and extend a welcome and hospitality to all who come to us in the Name of the Lord. And may we all strive to be the Demetrius's to other parts of God's Church too - sharing God's love as we go.